

## **Assessment appeals down**

By SAM HANANEL

*Journal staff writer*

More than half of all homeowners who formally challenged Fairfax County's annual real estate assessments last year won reductions in assessed property value, county officials said Wednesday.

But officials cautioned that only a tiny percentage of homeowners file appeals with the Department of Tax Administration - the office that makes assessments - so the statistics do not necessarily mean the odds of winning a reduction are good for most residents.

Of the 1,589 homeowners who challenged residential assessments last year, 56 percent won reductions, said Jane Coldsmith, director of the DTA's real estate division. While reductions fell within a wide range, Coldsmith said the average challenger saw the county's property assessment decrease by about 6 percent.

"An average is an average, so it may not really be representative for most people," Coldsmith said, also noting that assessment notices were mailed to more than 200,000 residential property owners, most of whom did not file appeals.

Residential assessments jumped an average of 11.26 percent last year, and residents are bracing for another double-digit increase on Monday, when County Executive Anthony H. Griffin unveils the new numbers as part of his proposed county government budget for fiscal 2003. In October, Griffin projected an average increase of 11.54 percent in assessments, but that number might be even higher based on increases recently seen in neighboring counties.

The county will mail assessment notices Monday through Wednesday, but residents can review individual assessment data on the county's Web site, [www.fairfaxcounty.gov](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov), as early as noon Monday.

While rising home values are a sign of a strong housing market, they also mean higher real estate taxes. That can pose a problem for residents on fixed incomes, especially when assessments on properties in some sought-after neighborhoods increase by more than 15 percent or 20 percent in a single year.

Despite the steady increase in real estate assessments over the past few years, the number of challenges by homeowners in 2001 actually decreased slightly compared with appeals filed in 2000, Coldsmith said.

"It may be due to having the data available on the Web site because people can go on and check the sales in their neighborhood," she said.

Coldsmith encourages homeowners to check the Web site before rushing to file an appeal. Once residents are aware of comparable home sales on which the assessment is based, she said, they often realize the increase is in line with market appreciation.

To challenge the county's assessment, homeowners need to demonstrate specific factors that the county failed to consider, Coldsmith said. The assessment might indicate, for example, that the property has three bathrooms when, in fact, it has only two.

"The clearer they can make their statement of appeal, the better the chance they have for reduction," she said.

Formal appeals of disputed assessments should be filed with the DTA by April 5. Residents not satisfied with DTA decisions may file an appeal with the county's Board of Equalization of Real Estate Assessments no later than 4:30 p.m. June 3.

Richard Mortimer, chairman of the equalization board, said 232 residential appeals were filed last year, but 146 were withdrawn. Of the 86 cases heard, 25 were reduced. He said the board received 12 more appeals last year than in 2000.

"The county by law is presumed to be correct except where the appellant shows the county made an error," Mortimer said. "You need to show they didn't take something into consideration, like they say you've got a full finished basement but your house is built on a slab."

#### **Appealing assessments**

Fairfax County will begin mailing annual real estate assessments next week, but all property owners can review individual assessment data on the county's Web site, [www.fairfaxcounty.gov](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov), as early as noon Monday.

Property owners with questions or complaints about assessments may call the Department of Tax Administration at (703) 222-8234.

A formal appeal of a disputed assessment should be filed with the DTA by April 5. Homeowners may print out appeal forms from the DTA Web site, [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dta/homepage.htm](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dta/homepage.htm), or ask to receive one by mail.

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**--SAM HANANEL**